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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK BIWEEKLY REPORT - January 31, 2006

1. The following are brief items of interest compiled by
Embassy Minsk.

Human Rights

12. GOB Deems Defamatory Documentary "Not Discriminatory"

On January 14, the Prosecutor General's Office ruled the controversial documentary about gypsies in Belarus that aired on a state-run television channel did not contain any discrimination or insults to the gypsy community. The program, entitled "Gypsies Going to Prison," aired twice late in 2005. Head of the Roma community and human rights activist Nikolai Kalinin maintained that the program "contains exclusively negative information portraying fellow Gypsies as criminals" and demanded that the GOB create a council of experts to handle ethnic questions.

13. Possible First "Discrediting Belarus" Violation

On January 27, The Grodno Regional Prosecutor's Office questioned Union of Belarusian Poles (UBP) activist and Polish magazine editor Andrzej Poczobut about his periodical, "Magazyn Polski no uchodźstwie." On January 17, police had detained Poczobut and seized 50 copies of the magazine he publishes. Poczobut refused to provide information to the police or to the prosecutor's office explaining who authorized him to distribute the magazine in Belarus. Poczobut fears he may be charged with "discrediting Belarus," which carries a prison sentence of up to three years.

14. GOB Suspends Independent Think Tank's Operation

On January 24, the Supreme Court suspended the operations of the independent think tank association "Beloruskiye Fabriki Mysli" (Belarusian Thought Factories - BFM) for three months due to lack of a legal address. BFM's chairman Oleg Manayev does not plan to contest the decision because he is sure that the authorities will liquidate BFM after the elections. Separately on January 23, Manayev, who is also the director of Independent Center for Economic and Socio-Political Research, received a warning from the Prosecutor's Office for conducting surveys and publishing the results without first receiving the proper accreditation from the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences.

15. Youth Association Faces Closure

On February 1, the Supreme Court of Belarus will hear the Ministry of Justice's (MOJ) case against Rada, the umbrella organization of seven youth NGOs. The MOJ accused Rada of engaging in politics, which is a violation of its charter, and interfering in the internal affairs of government agencies. The MOJ filed its suit after Rada held a forum in December at which Rada had proposed the creation of an alternative youth policy. Rada representative Svetlana Korolyova stated the suit was politically motivated.

16. GOB Allegedly Seized Ukrainian Journalists' Videocassettes

On January 28, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry lodged a complaint with the Belarusian Embassy in Kiev regarding the alleged seizure of Ukrainian journalists' videotapes by Belarusian authorities. These videos contained information about the March 19 presidential elections. The border guards told the journalists the tapes were seized because they could possibly contain evidence of anti-government activity. The Ukrainian MFA has asked the GOB to return the tapes.

17. Activist Uses the System to Fight Back

On January 20, opposition activist Oksana Novikova called for a criminal investigation into an anti-West program featured on the Belarusian state television analytical program "Political Technologies" on January 12. Yevgeny Novikov, who is well known for his anti-West remarks, hosts the program. The January 12th show claimed that NATO, Lithuania and Poland planned to "embark on hostilities against Belarus." Novikova feared that this program propagandizes war, which is illegal under Article 23 of the Criminal Code and carries a three year restricted freedom sentence.

18. Sorry Brestskiy Kuryer - You're Not on the List

On January 19, the local branch of the state postal service monopoly, Belpochta, refused to sign a delivery contract with the independent newspaper "Brestskiy Kuryer." The newspaper was excluded from the national postal service subscription list last year. Brestskiy Kuryer had hoped to establish a contract with Belpochta to deliver the newspaper to newsstands in the outer parts of the region.

19. GOB Does Not Find Satirical Cartoons Funny

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On January 13, police officials searched the apartment of youth group Malady Front activist and Milinkevich supporter Pavel Krasovsky in search of evidence linking him to the publication of satirical cartoons in the news bulletin, "Nablyudatel." Police stated these cartoons "publicly insult officials" since they feature city government employees. Police seized several copies of the news bulletin from Krasovsky's apartment and instructed him not to leave the city until further notice.

110. Russian Youths Released for Lack of Evidence

On January 17, the GOB released without charges 10 Russians from the youth group "We" and two Belarusians who had been detained three days before for allegedly painting opposition graffiti on a wall. Police arrested the youths because they were found near the freshly painted message, which contained obscenities. "We" representatives said that its members did not come to Belarus to carry out political activities. Authorities, in the end, released the youths due to lack of evidence.

Civil Society

111. Belarusian Wins International Modeling Contest

On January 19, 17 year-old Belarusian Yekaterina Domankova beat out girls from 39 other countries to win the 25th annual Super Model of the World contest in New York. She won a USD 250,000 modeling contract with Ford Models Agency. Belarusian press covered the story extensively.

Economy

112. Golden Share Rule or Outright Stealing?

On January 23, the private weekly "Belarusi i Rynok" discussed the

GOB's latest effort to nationalize a private company under the "golden share" rule. The shareholders of bakery chain Minskobkhlebproduct, which consists of staff and private citizens who used their privatization vouchers to buy shares of the company, received letters from the management asking them to transfer their shares without compensation to the government. The letter further explained that the GOB would only help the failing enterprise if it were fully government owned.

13. GOB Uses State Funds to Save Businesses, Support Industries

On January 14, Lukashenko issued a presidential edict, which outlines steps to help failing state-run companies return to profitability. The edict provides lengthy grace periods for payment of back taxes, custom duties, government loans and utility bills. In return, companies must promise not to increase their debts and must draft a five-year recovery plan. Separately on the same day, the Belarusian-Russian Union State promised to provide funds from its budget to support certain industries and the IT industry in particular.

14. Belarus Continues to Produce, But No Buyers in Sight

On January 19, the Ministry of Statistics reported that Belarusian companies raised overall production of finished goods by 15 percent to BYR 12.3 trillion [USD 5.7 billion] in 2005. The production of buses, trolleybuses, and tractors rose significantly. The output of many other categories of goods dropped severely: machine tools fell by 31.6 percent, lamps by 13.7 percent, electric motors by 11.4 percent. Production of motorcycles and bicycles fell nearly by half, and televisions and refrigerators by around four percent. However, many goods remain without buyers. Inventories of unsold finished goods equal BYR 871.5 billion [USD 405 million] or 88 percent of average monthly output. Five months' production of unsold washing machines and ten months' of watches also is sitting in warehouses.

15. GOB Develops Alternative Heating Sources

On January 16, the GOB announced that Belarus' first wood-fired power co-generation station TETS has opened and will begin operating in early 2006. This system uses wood waste and peat briquettes to generate both thermal energy and electric power and will produce enough energy to heat the city of Osipovichy and provide electric power to half of the district. Belarus plans to build three more TETS this year.

16. Belarus to Build "Safe" Nuclear Reactor

On January 22, the GOB announced plans to complete a nuclear power plant by 2010 as part of the 2006-2010 program entitled, "Nuclear Physics Technologies for the National Economy of Belarus." The

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cabinet has adopted this five-year plan and has allocated BYR 10.5 billion [USD 4.9 million] for the project. GOB officials predict that a nuclear power plant would allow Belarus to save USD 300 million annually on gas costs and would reduce Belarus' dependence on Russia. Construction, however, cannot begin before 2008 when a 10-year moratorium on nuclear power plant construction expires.

Bilateral Relations

17. China and Belarus: So Happy Together

On January 18 at a press conference celebrating 14 years of Chinese-Belarusian diplomatic relations, Chinese Ambassador to Belarus Yu Hunbin told journalists, "China and Belarus have reached a new stage of all-around cooperation and strategic partnership." Ambassador supported Belarus "development path" and the country's efforts to "protect its sovereignty and independence." Ambassador called for fully opened markets and stressed China's intention to set up joint companies and increase investment in Belarus.

Quote of the Week

[¶18](#). In the official newspaper of the Ministry of Defence, "Vo Slavu Rodiny," writer Vladimir Kozhevnikov warned about the dangers of educational exchanges with the U.S.:

"Educational programs such as Fulbright threaten Belarusian national security because they are designed as a propaganda tool....The United States will pay a lot of money to change the minds of Belarusian students and this will eventually be dangerous for Belarus."

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